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Mobile Multi-media Messages (MMS): Show-don't-tell in a Communication (*)

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Abstract: With its complex intersemiotic and intermedial textual configuration, the multimedia mobile message (MMS) offers a unique opportunity to apply visual semiotics tools to the theories of communication. By means of an experimental technical device used by a sample of MMS users who exchanged real image-containing messages, the author highlights the ways in which individuals play with the technical constraints of the MMS application during message production. The analysis of a set of simple messages reveals the extent to which the natural indicial tension of photography impregnates the messages, to the point of their assuming a playful dimension, through ingenious playing on meaning within the framework of a private message.

Key words: MMS, semiotics, interpersonnal communication, image, text, message

At the beginning of 2001, in a text entitled "Visual semiotics in France: paradoxes and enthusiasm"¹, reviewing the current stakes of the discipline as practiced in France, Anne Beyeart (University of Limoges and Paris I) raised the question of expectations regarding visual semiotics. The most difficult task for the discipline today is to be able to free itself from the model - or culture - of linguistics. In the near future of visual semiotics, the author underlines that:

"With the development of new technologies and the arrival of visual works of a new kind, it (visual semiotics) is confronted with other stakes [...] This recently emerging "artistic practice" undoubtedly appears polymorphic and polysensoral, generating intersemiotic systems, new practices of digital editing. We assume that its narrative content will be familiar to us, but that other dimensions will also be undetermining. There is no doubt that the question of the iconic and the

(*) This text is the fruit of research that the author is conducting for his thesis entitled "The multimedia mobile message (MMS): from the plasticity of the digital image towards the new poetics of writing" with the logistical and financial support of France Telecom R&D.

¹ Online document hosted by the website of the VISIO review, which is also the AISV (International Association of Visual Semiotics) home page. See: www.fl.ulaval.ca/hst/visio/france.htm

plastic will arise again [...] if however the plastic does not slip towards other data! With respect to these new forms of visual communication, it will in any case be necessary to check the validity of the current instruments of analysis, as well as to provide other tools."

This forecast of artistic practice appears even more pertinent today, particularly since it seems to be supported by the emergent form of mobile multi-media message (also called MMS by mobile telephony operators, responsible for its design on a technical and commercial level). The MMS could be defined as a writing space assisted by a mediatized interface within an interpersonal communication framework. In practice, the MMS can be likened to a text message (SMS) combined with a snapshot, most of the time taken using digital camera integrated in the owner's mobile phone. As a result, the MMS offers, from a certain point of view, an original framework for the field of research in semiotics: comparing visual statements with verbal statements within the not primarily artistic, but mainly communicational practice of two individuals owning the appropriate equipment. Therefore, the intention to mean something being manifest - inherent to the visual and linguistic content of the MMS - this kind of message and digital practice it is tempting to compare semiotics and communication theories. Moreover, although the MMS cannot be classified as an artistic activity, it is closely linked to the tradition of family photography (BOURDIEU, 1989) and home videos (ODIN, 1995), which have their own operational models (whose "artistic aims" are quite present, creating a form of social tension in the production of works). In addition, the term "multi-media" points to a polysensoriality inherent in the message, justifying the attempt to assess it using semiotic tools, as the latter aim to give a better understanding of this type of polymorphic, plastic - digital - object.

Indeed, the MMS is a composite item, which can contain text, digital picture, sound data, movies, or all of these elements. The MMS is a digital object with a creative purpose, in which the suggested choice of attachment requires harmonious coordination of the various possible elements on the part of the transmitter. The creator of the MMS therefore passes from the status of script writer (the text), to that of photographer (digital photography), to that of sound taker (digital sound track) and movie director (digital video sequence). The MMS sender decides on the subject of the message, takes the shots, and is often also the main actor in the sequence filmed, or the person in the photos. The sender is also responsible for assembling or "directing" the elements. The creation of a MMS thus obviously requires some technical knowledge, as well as skills mimicking those needed at all stages of the audio-visual production chain. The various procedures involved

in MMS creation make it even more difficult to define the MMS. More than a simple message (communicational dimension), the MMS is a digital document (a composition of multimedia elements), which draws upon the creativity and freedom of each individual. Since it is distributed, the MMS also becomes a creation, even a piece of work. Moreover, the writer of the MMS (if the textual aspect is privileged) becomes the transmitter as soon as the document is transferred to the network, thus propelling the MMS from the status of document to that of communication. These difficulties in defining the MMS creator point directly to the plasticity of the MMS itself, which assumes all of the properties of its "traditional" component media.

Consequently, when one perceives the various effects of the MMS techno-semiotics complexity like its intersemiotic structure, the validity of employing current semiotic tools to approach this type of interpersonal exchange is an obvious issue. This paper does not attempt to answer this question, but intends to build a concrete analytical approach towards a first reading of MMS content.

Firstly, the specificity of production conditions, as well as the plurality of MMS uses and the difficulty of accessing the private content exchanged by users, all make analysing MMS a highly complex process. Given the composite nature of the media with its complex editing structure – due to the specific mobile phone morphology-, and making the MMS more a metatext than a text, how can users appropriate this media form?

Secondly, based on the sample of collected messages, this paper aims to propose an interpretation of the semiotic inclinations² of the messages by crossing users' biographical information with that of their production. This reading is limited to messages composed of one image and one text only, like most MMS. It proposes a qualifying approach to the status of the image in the general organisation of the MMS. Therefore, this first evaluation makes it possible to comprehend the MMS editing stakes, and opens up new methodological prospects for a socio-semiotical approach adapted to the subtleties, of MMS practices, which fall directly into line with the questions raised by Anne Beyaert on the future of visual semiotics.

² This term is borrowed from SOUCHIER, JEANNERET & LE MAREC (2003).

■ Methodology

Within France Telecom Research & Development department, with the assistance of Marc Relieu and Julien Kahn's team, a data-processing device was developed to recover the content of messages exchanged between a sample of users. This new device is based on the principle of a local software application, transparent for the user, implemented on a specific mobile model (Nokia 3650), which makes a digital copy of all the attachments present in the body of the MMS (text, image, video, etc). This copy is stored on the terminal and is sent automatically via the GPRS network (also used to send the original MMS) to a specific server, able to reprocess the information and to post it via a web site set up expressly for this experiment. Researchers can therefore access all the content exchanged between participants in the experiment, as well as the "metadata" linked to it, i.e. the identity of the transmitter and recipients, the time-stamp on reception, sending and modification of the message.

This solution was developed to allow the recovery of the content really exchanged, needed for the qualitative analysis of MMS practices. In such an analysis we assume that the content of the message is important in determining the quality aspect of the interaction. This is based on previous research in ethnomethodology on the subject of the MMS (KOSKINEN & KURVINEN, 2002), which demonstrated that, "The development of mobile images produces a proper interactional order" and strongly extends the traditional practices of amateur home photography.

A six month experiment was conducted with fourteen users. User recruitment was not designed to provide a sample of all socio-professional categories, but based on the enthusiasm of the participants to exchange these kind of messages, since obtaining exchanges of quality was the major concern, with a constant follow-up by participants (an incentive to send messages was given by promised exemption from payment for the MMS service). Recruitment took place in two stages: the first consisted in differentiating the "beginners" (four friends, including a couple) from the expert users (4 friends, all fans of mobile telephony). The exchanges were free within each group, but limited to it, since the two groups did not know each other. The second stage was designed with a view to improving the output of the exchanges, assuming that a couple (friends or lovers) exchanged more than a larger group of friends. Three pairs of couples were considered (a mother and her daughter, both very close; a homosexual couple; and a couple of girls who were also very close friends). The results

consisted of many messages exchanged by pairs of users (nearly 300, all in all), constituting true monitoring of the messages' evolution over time. This approach made it possible to establish a message database for each user. This database enabled us to check that each user had, over the length and the whole of his/her message, the shape of a visual signature of his/her own (we will reconsider this aspect more closely in the analysis of the messages)

However, this device, although conceived and considered as neutrally and objectively as possible, testifies to at least two forms of the observer's involvement: firstly, in considering the content of the messages as a significant element of exchange practices, and secondly, to postulate that the messages themselves are self-sufficient enough to be understood by an outsider (in this case the researcher). Therefore, even before the end of the experiment, we asked six users to come and freely comment on each one of their MMS. Although this approach did enable us to clarify certain messages, the discursive elements related to the images raise methodological problems. As a result, we extract only the biographical and contextual elements from these exchanges that allowed us to understand some subtleties in the messages.

However, our conversations with participants in the experiment also confirmed the presumed weakness of this collecting device: the visual structure of a web page. Although the web site makes it possible to post all of the exchanges between two users, it cannot reproduce the appearance effects of a message on the specific screen of a mobile terminal, itself peculiar to a given brand. It was inconceivable to limit the MMS practice to the attachments' content, independent of the posting methods, the telephone-object morphology or the message's edition interface. So the specificities of MMS made us realize that an analysis of attachments not accounting for the materiality of the support and the plasticity of the media appeared to be insufficient.

Indeed, this form of exchange is particular because it is carried out within a new framework, in which the object of watching is also the object of media production. This functional promiscuity offers new combinations and new articulations of individual practices. Unlike with a standard material support, the specific moment that the image is received is also the moment when it is consulted thanks to the original design of the data-processing application. The reception at the same time is the purpose of the exchange, but also bears a first minimal significance, which is the reading of the image within a personalized and a strongly individualized framework such as the mobile telephone. The MMS is simultaneously a piece of content, contains

information on the arrival of this content, and traces the exchange between two individuals. For this reason, any exchange of image via the MMS service, whatever the image may be, is already a communication, albeit minimal. In the same way, upon reception of a MMS the function "Answer" is highlighted in the majority of applications to facilitate the return exchange, immediately emphasizing the idea that the MMS is, above all, a link in a logical communication persistence (one could suppose that "Save" or "Delete" would be suitable as well).

Consequently it seems obvious that the general ergonomics of the MMS application takes an active part in the construction of the MMS as a communication object, as much as the content itself. As this application (software) is closely related to the general ergonomics of the object "cameraphone" (hardware), this mix between optics and networking - the essence of the cameraphone - should not be overlooked in research into such communication by images.

The cameraphone is also the main device in the production chain of the MMS, since it is both the locus of production (the telephone memory as the recipient of the user interface), the tool of production (microphone, camera, keypad), the point of departure for transmission (access to other GPRS cells spread across the territory) and the endpoint of other messages, as well as the locus where the messages are read.

The MMS is an inscription structure, which proposes an editing framework in which its various semiotic items can be mixed and arranged. So the writer has to enter a circuit, a techno-semiotics track, in which he alternates between invitations to take initiatives (shooting), and constraining frames (text limited to 900 characters, for example). As these constraining dimensions are applied in the assembly of the frames (in linking the text with the image), the editorial entry points are multiplied. One can for example start to draft a MMS by a snapshot and decide to send a message starting from the image thus created; or to start the drafting with a textual entry, and then to add previously made up attachments, by using the storage memory of the cameraphone. These "compiling strategies", offered by the phone interface, which can be different according to ranges' and the models of the various devices, are the sign of a plasticity related to the digital value of the MMS documents.

Those strategies are, from the user's point of view, both free space and semiotic doubling effects that are experienced as ergonomic mistakes by the user. Design variations in the interface, telephone-device and snapshooting

functions of various phones make the MMS a new application for traditional writing screens, like a Word page can be, for example.

As a hybrid object, the cameraphone is not stabilized in its interface and its process. Each model of cameraphone has its own particular way of shooting, a different MMS application as well as a distinctive screen in terms of texture and text. These variations, sometimes insignificant within the same range of models, are emphasized in different categories of models and grow with all new technical evolutions. Therefore, there is no standard MMS imagery, such as the digital image of the IRM or the image resulting from a digital video camera. Although there is a characteristic digital texture or grain – like a pixels signature - of digital photography resulting from a cameraphone, we must bear in mind that the MMS is not only one image, nor even an image with a text. It is somehow a composite set of these documents circulating between various phone devices - an agglomeration of visual and textual signs which react differently according to the reading structure. Beyond the incompatibility of the terminals, which should disappear in the future, the most remarkable feature of MMS is the hiatus that can exist between its writing structure (the device phone upon which the MMS is created) and its reading structure (which can be another device phone, but also an e-mail box, a website, a weblog, a postcard etc.). That's why our methodology must make it possible to identify and qualify this "plasticity" of the MMS, and to understand how individual practices are articulated with this 'reiteration of images.'

Compared to screen-writing, where each user has the same framework, the MMS can be composed differently according to the model of the mobile telephone and sometimes within the same range. The photography module is one of the most progressive alternatives, and this modularity is even a sales argument, as well as a feature of the telephone design. The morphology of the objects is significant. If a model has its lens on the edge of the phone, the pictures, taken in a context of isomorphism to a video camera shooting, will appear in landscape mode, entirely determining the process of MMS posting and formatting by the way in which the picture is taken. Identically, rotating circular lenses (360°), encourage the shooting of self-portraits by their reflective and twistable aspect.

Hence the drafting of a MMS can be like a complex syntactic composition close to computer-assisted video editing at one extreme, or as simple as sending an image from the photographic repertory, requiring a minimal handling of buttons. During the drafting of a MMS or at its end, an option allows the sender "to display" the message. This option makes it possible to

watch the content of the MMS as is, thanks to the mediaplayer integrated in the cameraphone, which simulates message reception. In other words, users are able to read or see how their messages will look on the remote, receiving device. This option is significant for the techno-semiotic design of the MMS. However, this option may also be useless since it becomes effective only if the distant device is perfectly identical to the sending device. Moreover, most of the time, users are ignorant of this technical limitation and if not, they often don't know their correspondent's telephone model. This option is consequently formal proof that the multi-media message is a message as much as a meta-message of this same message. Indeed, this virtual player (which is not proposed on all interfaces) transforms our perception of the MMS, not as an inscription structure in realtime, like the textual SMS for example, but as an interpretation of a digital meta-text. In other words, to borrow the term indexed in the screen-writing of Emmanuël Souchier and Yves Jeanneret (JEANNERET & SOUCHIER, 1999), the MMS is more of an architext, like HTML reinterpreted by a browser like Internet Explorer, than a text, even if it is so syntactically and semiotically rich. "The text is born from the architext which marks the writing out of it."

The opening and closing tags (< and >), which are the usual invisible signs of the architext as meta-text, are sometimes even visible during the drafting of a MMS. They act as a metaphorical indicial value of the coded data-processing programming assumed by the designers and understood as such by the users, or like the accidental residual of an inoperative artifice.

The MMS is an architext in the sense that it is both the editing structure, the drafting of the MMS and its reading and the reorganizational structure of the text.

Nonetheless, the MMS becomes something more than a simple message: it is an architext launched on the network, in a space of probabilities, in a random actualization mode of its codified logic structure, indissociable from the operating mode of display chosen by the reception interface. The MMS is a form of permanent update of this ever clearer dissociation between the physical structures of digital documents, discussed by D.Cotte. The MMS is simultaneously a matrix, and the updated text syntax of this matrix

However, in practice, it is often difficult to discern the architext from the text itself, like in the standard PowerPoint document that acts as the framework for compiling the text and visuals and the player of these same textual data at the same time. For the MMS, a picture with a text is also

displayed on the screen as such, without much variation. It is by twisting the MMS at the edge of its display that one locates the differences – the mark of an interpreted digital metatext

This plasticity of the MMS in all of its forms raises the question of the metamorphosis of the media content connected to the social players: in which way are players aware of the dissociation of this structure, these transformations, this metamorphosis? To what extent does it constitute an obstacle to creativity and to what degree does it engage or supply creative possibilities?

So even before analysis of the message, the semiotic tools available, and the data from our internal device, seem to be useless faced with the intersemiotic complexity of the MMS. A choice had to be made in the delineation of our approach. We therefore chose to review the pictures collected by our device and to link these pictures with our contextual knowledge of the production and reception of the messages, provided by the users themselves. We focused on the simplest and most frequent messages from a formal point of view i.e. an image and a text. Several choices were possible to apprehend the connection between image and text, in order to check if it is truly in this tension that the messages' significance partly settles. We quite simply decided to directly question the way in which the image is quoted, commented or indicated, in the proper body of the message text.

This analysis proposes cognitive reading tracks of MMS messages. Does this analysis confirm our methodological precautions and our warnings? In other words, does the precise messages analysis bring up new knowledge, making it possible to establish a methodology appropriate to the characteristics of MMS exchanges?

■ Analysis

If only the formally simplest messages are retained among those obtained, one thus encounters a structure usually found within the world of publishing: an image and a text. The most current relationship between these two entities is the illustration and the caption, which are two directional axes of reading. Does one find this relationship in a MMS message?

How can this relationship between text and image be approached? If one retains, among these messages, those whose text mentions the image, one raises an interesting point: numerous expressions pointing to an object or a person present in the picture: "here", "there ", "there is ", "take a look at", "watch this". - terms inviting recipients to look at the picture or at a precise part of it.

This relative indexical abundance is both obvious and paradoxical: indeed, what could be more obvious than finding in a text which comments on a picture, adverbs pointing to the latter, highlighting it and recommending to look at specific points. The text then becomes a caption of the picture in a natural order of reading. However, although those suggestions of reading seem logical because they help to interpret the message, it nevertheless remains paradoxical given the economy of the whole multi-media message. Indeed, the majority of the texts repeat what the picture already says, in a form that one could describe as pleonasmic. Are the expressions like "take a look at" or "here" necessary in a message where one cannot do anything but look at this picture? As the picture emerges at the opening of the message (the message being mostly the picture), the recipient's gaze and full attention converge towards it automatically. Isn't a text inviting us to look at the picture consequently superfluous? Senders could rationalize their use of the space allocated to the text to provide other information, rather than designating or describing the image.

This pleonasmic or reflexive connection between the text and the picture is present in most of the messages reviewed, even when no deictic expressions were used in the text. The use of verbs describing a state of being/mind in the text is often related to a picture that supposedly illustrates this state: "I am in train" (self-portrait from where benches the SNCF are distinguished), "I am exhausted" (photography of a mimic tiredness face), "he's watching TV", "it's crowded" etc. In such cases text and the image form a duet, whose repetition of the same message is supposed to bring veracity and proof. Whereas the use of the deictic in the text tacitly indicates the supremacy of the image over the text in an informational way (the text is subordinated to the image having only the designation of this one as finality), here the reflexivity of the text compared to the image indicates another reading order: information is in the text, and the image comes to bring and to help in the authenticity of the matter.

This tension between the effect of veracity, of authenticity (proof via the image) is all the more present when it is assumed like such (photo 1): "Don't worry; he's quiet at home... I'm watching him!" Picture following of a man

sitting at a table, on profile, who does not seem to suspect that it is shot by a camera (the person does not take a pose).

Photo 1



Or this photo (2), shot in the street, without a true object, but to prove that one is well in the street, close to arriving at an appointment: "I'm coming right now. U wait!".

Photo 2



The function of the message here is used as much to mean its presence in place as to authenticate it. This function of the MMS seems to be obvious: the picture comes to support the matter and to waylay all uncertainties or suspicions that a SMS or a traditional phone call could not have disclosed. To attach the image to words seems to be the best way to authenticate the situation.

However, from a purely logical point of view, nothing proves that the photo was taken at the time the MMS was sent. In fact, this man was perhaps sitting at a table yesterday at the same hour, or this street is perhaps a street very far away from the meeting point. The possibility of extracting an image from the storage memory of mobile telephones

definitively cancels, from a legal point of view, any credibility of attempting to provide proof via an image. Identically, we noticed the tendency of one user to communicate by MMS while miming with her face or her body the text that she wrote. In fact, one no longer knows if it is the text which is describing the image (in this case of mimic normally self-significant) or if it is the image which the content of the text corroborate by the physical presence of the girl. In all events we are faced with a pleonasmic, redundant, reflexive stylistic device between the image and the text which, by its paradoxical and quasi systematic aspect, must mean something in the economy of whole MMS messages.

The item MMS is, in our opinion, through its closeness to photography, a temporality-creating machine. In other words, the MMS is by its nature an event that lends reality to a life snapshot for its receiver, including geographical and temporal information, ("I was there at that time") and which condenses and updates its own drafting in the same time ("I was there at that time and I took a picture and sent it to you"). The MMS is the synchronic item-message of a density of diachronic prior and presupposed actions. A time exists, of shooting, writing, sending, transiting on the network, opening, reading, archiving, re-reading. Some terminals while opening the message, even display a small countdown in seconds thus allowing to represent the MMS in its factual dimension. If this dimension is the most visible while receiving a video or image-containing message which, to be read, cannot free itself from the real time of the document, it is less noticeable when the message contains only an image or a text.

If we take an everyday life example, we could define the temporality at the heart of the MMS as that which differentiates today's digital photo-cabin from the traditional photo-cabin (with chemical processing). In the latter, temporality within the space-time dimension in the photo-cabin is stressed through the flashes of the shooting, which are simultaneous incompressible moments of the time passed in the photo-cabin. In other words, the time passed inside the cabin, once the coin inserted, is the same for everybody, and is actualized by the four pictures produced by the cabin. For modern photo-cabins, the pictures produced cannot translate events and temporality of the real time passed inside the cabin. The possibility to choose one's position, to erase the shooting, to action the shooting are moments and actions which are imperceptible in the pictures finally produced, while constituting the essence of modern digital photomats.

Therefore, the received message creates the illusion of instantaneity and proximity (the use of deictic words as "look" and the use of redundant words

or postures), but which are, in the end, only simulated, imitated or forwarded unwillingly by users.

How can we define this temporal tension, which cannot reasonably be an act of authentication for users, without removing the obvious veracity dimension from the picture?

To provide some brief answers, it is necessary to quickly reconsider the specificity of the photographic image, compared with any other form of reality representation. Philippe Dubois (DUBOIS, 1990) points out that a photograph can be "only one proof of existence and not a proof of sense", which is according to him, built. Martine Joly in *L'image et les signes* (JOLY, 2004) supported this reflexion, by quoting the famous photographic theory of Roland Barthes' it-have-been in *La Chambre claire* (BARTHES, 1980):

"Because of its specific genesis, a photograph offers "a double conjunction of reality and past". What is represented necessarily has existed and has printed its own luminous trace on the film: "Whatever the objections of our critical spirit, we are forced to believe in the existence of the object represented, i.e. made present in time and space [...] the photograph is not a copy of reality but an emanation of the real past: a magic and not an art". The referent adheres, the photograph is a trace, and consequently, though "resembling" and though built, it is specific because it is a sign according to the peircian term."

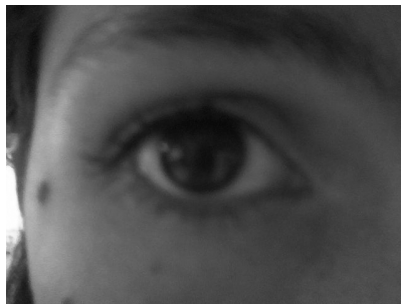
By handling images, photographs, our users of MMS, cannot withdraw themselves completely from this indicial dimension, which comes to invest, in one way or the other, the message and its space of edition.

So one can understand the use of deictic expressions pointing to the image, like the first decoding - as primarily it is - of the signs that the photograph necessarily creates. In addition with the difficulty of the pictures readability, noted by the users, the furtive and discrete dimension of the mobile phone allowing non-conventionnal snapshots, one can speak about an indicial tension in the heart of the MMS creation. The text is articulating with the picture like a set of correspondences: the objective for the reader is to find in the image the indices, the signs (built or not) given by the author to be seen for the message understanding. In this case, the difficulty of decoding is often in accordance with the quality of the snapshot, or, as we will see, with the ludic tendencies of each one.

The authors of the MMS give to the image, mainly during the play of the technical constraints of the application, other features which give

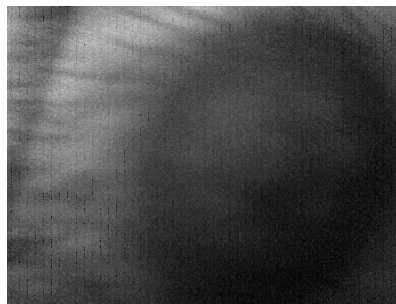
significance to the message. For example in this message (photo 3): "here is a tired woman eye" relating to a close up of an eye, slightly blurred. If one understands the deictic "here", as a repetition, since there is nothing other with the image but the indicated eye, one finds also this pleonasmic tension of the image, which does nothing but to repeat what the text already says (even if it is not obvious whether the eye is that of a woman, who is also tired).

Photo 3



But there are other stakes in this message. There is a will to play with the focus, with the formats, with the self-portrait genre. The text cancels certain minimal ambiguities on the content of the image, but the remaining of the indices are in the hands of the users and for their deep understanding: do the color and the shape of the eye or the beauty spot, for example, make it possible to identify this woman?

Photo 4



In the same way, this photograph (4) of a male nipple, whose text is: "sex, nipple, ass? : -)". Here the polysemia of the image and the difficulties of its interpretation are directly integrated in the body of the message in order to give a sense to the message in a quiz form. In this instance there is

a real reappropriation of the difficulty of understanding the image, which turns this difficulty into an independent outline of the message itself.

From the deictic, which aims to indicate and perfect the outlines of the object, a reversed form appears where the text comes to widen the frame and the borders of the image. The message becomes a game, which expresses no more than the difficulty of wanting to communicate by using an image.

This playful dimension in the pretence of the image is conveyed significantly by these three message exchanges between a couple of young boys. First message: (photo 5): "*Dirait on pa ke j attends dj david?....*" (wouldn't ya say i wait for dj david). Answer (photo 6): "*En attendant met toi ca!*" (while waitin' take that !). Answer of the first sender (photo 7): "*Rassure toi il s agit de mon bras! Tu fais super ultra mega giga hiper chier de faire ton faux jaloux!!*" (Cool down it's just my arm ! U super ultra mega giga make me piss off w/your fake jealousy !)

Photo 5

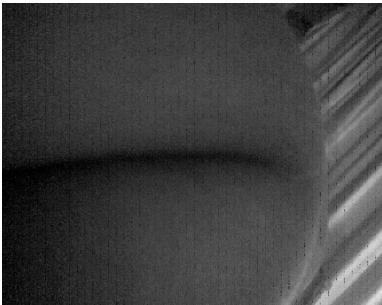


Photo 6

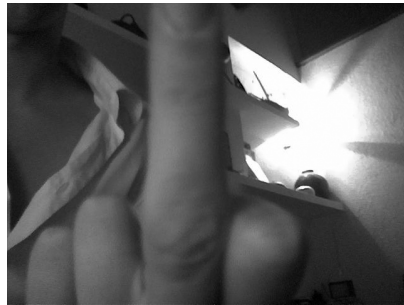


Photo 7



The first message plays with the ambiguous interpretation of the picture: the sender seems to say he's in a waiting position for a certain David, a DJ, in a more than evocative position, as the picture resembles a naked posterior (to the right, at 90°). The text in this point of view is suggesting some ambiguity: first of all, the use of the phrase "wouldn't ya say", used more by children in games under the conditional form: "You would have said..." The playful dimension of this phrase is reinforced by the use of a negative interrogative of a familiar nature. Thus, we are in the same register as the quiz of the previous picture, but applied to the users' personal universe. Knowing that the picture may deceive, better than make a quiz, the author of the first message plays directly on the polysemic dimension of the picture and enters into a mini-role-play. Only the turn of the text is a clue to the significance of this game.

The answer to this point of view is very meaningful: the obscene gesture shows that the person has understood the message as the sender wanted him to, in other words a pair of naked buttocks waiting. In this way the text of the answer plays again on the same clues left by the sender: "waiting" which could as well be employed in its casual form, or in the context: "while waiting, take this instead of DJ David...". The answer thus follows the same playful dimension in the format, except the fact that the answer, in its vulgarity, seems to close the exercise de style in its violent form.

Therefore, the third message is, in this perspective, the falling of masks, the answer to the implicit quiz, before the ending imposed by the message no. 2. While playing on the focus, we perceive that what we understood as – or at least what the sender wanted to pretend – as a posterior, was only a folded arm. By shooting his folded arm, he indicates that it was just about a zoom effect (as if, artificially, he had pulled back the lens), and that it was indeed a framing effect: a folded arm, from a certain point of view, could resemble a posterior. But the most interesting aspect of this exchange is to notice the sender employing the words "fake jealousy" to qualify his friend's attitude. Indeed, the signs of the game were so many on both sides that it seems inconceivable that his friend could have taken the information for real. The violent, and at the same time, playful answer by his friend simply explains that there are subjects that should not be joked about.

This third and last image reflects directly, by the use of the phrase "cool down", to the authentic meaning mentioned before, some truthfulness imposed by the picture in the message. This succession of exchanges, by the quality of control over word games and pretences, points to the indexical relation between image and text. The composition of a MMS establishes a

hierarchy and a particular relationship within the reception space: what emerges from the reading of a message is a work of criticism of the text by the image, and vice-versa.

■ Conclusion

There is a rich and varied range of games based on meaning that draw on the relation between image and text, and which are reminiscent of linguistic structures, making it tempting to try and compare these structures to creating MMS. In this perspective, the initial forecast by Anne Beyaert, shared undoubtedly by many researchers in human sciences, is to be minimised: the new digital media do not always produce new semiotic forms, but often give rise to more vivid combinations of existing forms; and linguistic tools remain useful for their comprehension.

However, our cognitive approach to the MMS should not be reduced to a semio-linguistic analysis of the data gathered from users. Indeed, such an analysis promoting a relation between the telephone's morphology, the editing constraints and the production of messages couldn't be verified without examining the precise techno-semiotic display conditions of MMS. In other words, by getting involved in the specific writing ergonomics' digital patterns.

Therefore, as far as a follow-up to this research is concerned, it could be useful to analyse the specific "screen writing" constituted by the use of the cameraphone, and to establish the "poietic" of the piece of work's creation in the production and reception of such messages, for example by detailed analysis of the relations between the induced initiative creative tools and the morphological constraints of the object.

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